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ABSTRACT

Foreign students in American colleges and universities experience difficulty with various aspects of English composition, especially grammar, mechanics, syntax, sentence and paragraph structure, and report writing. One way to deal with the situation is to set up a composition course in ESL in which the specific problems of non-native speakers are addressed. Several approaches can be used to deal with problems in English written expression. Some of these are: (1) a theoretical introduction to the history of English inflections followed by practice; (2) pattern practice on particular problem areas; (3) writing exercises; (4) use of a punctuation chart; (5) laying basic ground-rules for sentence and paragraph structure, and developing exercises on them; (6) exercises on writing sentences from models; and (7) instruction in writing essays and reports using an outline. (AMH)

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The ESL Student's Struggles with Written English

by
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Theoretically, my foreign students are fairly adept at speaking and writing English. They have scored above a particular level on a proficiency exam, and they are supposedly ready to take a regular freshman composition course. This is where I come in -- I teach a special section of Freshman composition for foreign students. My students' English proficiencies, however, vary widely, frequently belying their test scores. Some of them are far from ready for a regular freshman composition course. Thus, my observations about the problems my students have with written English are probably valid for foreign students in general.

Talking with colleagues in other departments, I have learned that a theme for my class is not the only sort of writing with which these students need help. Compositions, reports for labs and other courses, essay exam answers, and letters of application, if they are written by foreign students, all indicate the problems these students have with English: grammatical problems, mechanical problems, organizational problems, and problems of clarity, simplicity, and specificity.

The grammatical problems include the omission of noun and verb inflections, the omission of articles, faulty subject-verb agreement, and faulty pronoun-antecedent agreement. When you see the sort of English illustrated here, don't assume that the task assigned to you is impossible:

> Cucumber can be use in different kind of salad or as snack or sometime dessert. This fruits is sometime call vagetable. They have many recipe.

Errors of this kind are natural, predictable errors for foreign students to make. Their languages may be more highly inflected than English, which leads them to the over-generalization that English inflections don't matter; or their languages may be less highly inflected, which inhibits their realization that it is necessary to put an "s" on a plural noun, to add an "s" to some present tense verbs, to precede a noun with an a, an, or the, and to

differentiate between he/she and they, and between they and them. Written exercises can help alleviate these problems: filling in blanks focuses attention on those positions within a phrase or clause which are likely to need an article or an inflectional suffix; correcting a classmate's theme increases one's awareness that clear statement is partially dependent on correct grammar. Oral exercises are also helpful: dictating a paragraph in a newspaper with exaggerated pronunciation of inflectional suffixes helps some students listen for inflections while they are writing. Sometimes, unlikely approaches yield positive results.

My students commit fewer inflectional goofs after my standard, short lecture on the history of English inflections. This lecture was not originally part of the course; I included it one semester to give the students practice in outlining, note-taking, and taking accurate dictation. But it produced unexpected results, so I incorporated it into my syllabus. The students seemed comforted to know that English once had had a "proper" set of paradigms for noun case and number, and for verb tense, person, and number, and to know that their perception of English as a "degenerate" language was correct. (Eventually, we discuss those myths about language, but at this point, misconceptions are actually rather useful.) I have had my students write an Elizabethan paragraph, with full use of the pronouns "thou, thine, thee" and the verb inflections "-est" and "-eth," as in "thou seest" and "s/he sayeth." They usually do very well, they enjoy it, and it improves their understanding and correct use of Modern English inflections.

Students whose languages do not include the equivalent of English articles understandably have difficulty figuring out when one is needed and when it is not. If you think about it, the omission or inclusion of an article is not a simple matter. One generalization which covers half the cases is that an article must be used with a singular noun if that noun, in that context, has a possible plural. The word "cucumber," in the first example, could be read either as a generic noun, with no plural, or as a singular form of a noun which could just as well have been plural, so the phrase should read, "A cucumber can be used . . ." The choice of the indefinite or definite article poses fewer problems for foreign students than the decision to include or exclude one.

Some of my students are at the stage where they know that verbs need suffixes, but they are not quite sure where or why. So they write sentences like these:

Lab students should verified the proportions.

He will reads the assignment.

We should have asking for an explanation.

We were surprising by the conclusions.

The ski tourer would strides along, . . .

Pattern practice, using a modified transformational grammar model, works well. If students know that every sentence needs either a modal verb or a tense-marked verb, but never both, they are less apt to come up with "should verified" and "will reads." Similarly, if they know that a present participle suffix "ing" requires a form of "be" in front of it, and that a past participle suffix requires a form of either "be" or "have" in front of it, they are ready to work with patterns and exercises like these:

Fill in the blanks in each of the following sentences, following the pattern for each set.

<u>active sentences</u>

Pattern A: Modal & Main Verb Stem (no inflection)

Example: Sam can talk.

Sentences:

1. 2. 3. . . . n

Pattern B: Main Verb Stem & Present Tense ("s" and ∅ inflection)

Examples: Sam talks. We talk.

Sentences: 1. The student study ____.

Pattern C: Main Verb Stem & Past Tense ("ed" inflection - regular)

Examples: Sam talked. We talked.

Sentences: 1. The students work___. 2. 3. . . . n

Pattern D: Modal & have & Main Verb Stem & Past Participle ("ed/en" inflection)

Examples: The student should have worked.

Sentences: 1. He may have drive__.

2. They could have call__.

Pattern E: have & Present Tense & Main Verb Stem & Past Participle

Examples: He has talked. We have talked.

Sentences: 1. You ha__ work__. 2. I ha__ drive__.

Pattern F: have & Past Tense & Main Verb Stem & Past Participle

Example: They had talked.

Sentences:

Pattern G: Modal & be & Main Verb & Present Participle "ing"

Examples: She will be studying. inflection)

Sentences:

Pattern H: be & Present Tense & Main Verb & Present Participle

Examples: I am talking. She is talking.

We/ You/ They are talking.

Sentences:

Pattern I: be & Past Tense & Main Verb & Present Participle

Examples: I/He was talking. We/You/They were talking.

Pattern J: Modal & have & be & Past Participle & Main Verb & Present Participle

Example: He could have been working.

Sentences: He [be] hide_.

Pattern O: be & Past Tense & Main Verb & Past Participle

Examples: I/It was covered. We/You/They were covered.

Sentences:

Pattern P: Modal & have & be & Past Participle & Main Verb & Past Participle

Examples: They should have been warned.

Sentences:

Pattern Q: have & Present Tense & be & Past Participle & Main Verb & Past Participle

Examples: He has been warned. They have been warned.

Sentences: 1. I ha__ be__ ask__.

Pattern R: have & Past Tense & be & Past Participle & Main Verb & Past Participle

Examples: He had been fired.

Sentences:

Pattern S: Modal & be & be & Present Participle & Main Verb & Past Participle

Pattern T: be & Present Tense & be & Present Participle. . .
Pattern U: be & Past Tense & be & Present Participle . . .
Pattern V: Modal & have & be & Past Participle & be & Present Participle & Main Verb & Past Participle
Pattern W: have & Present Tense & be & Past Participle & be . . .
Pattern X: have & Past Tense & be & Past Participle & be . . .

One advantage of the pattern and exercise approach is that while the class as a whole is working on something else -- report writing, finding and using sources, or constructing an outline -- those who need practice with verb inflections, sentence structure, punctuation, or prepositions can be simultaneously working on exercises designed to help their individual problems.

English pronouns can be a problem even for a native speaker of English. The perennial native English speaker's dilemma concerning the use of "his," "her," or "their" for a singular impersonal antecedent provides a natural starting point for a discussion of pronoun agreement and reference. Foreign students, on the whole, are more aware than native ones that the use of "their" in a sentence like "Everyone should bring their own bottle" is grammatically incorrect. They can also see the absurdity of extensive use of "one" -- "Everyone should bring one's own bottle"? Many of them, especially those from the Middle East, are amused at this perceived deficiency of English: their languages have what English lacks -- a gender-neutral pronoun for a human/animate antecedent. Some of them do have a problem, however, with selecting the right pronoun for a non-count antecedent or for an abstract antecedent, especially if it is a phrase or clause. For example:

It are necessary to test any hypothesis. They often need elaborate equipment.

I prefer the food of Iran to American food. They are hotter and have more flavor.

Downhill skiing is exciting, but they can also be dangerous.

Some of the mechanical problems which appear in foreign students work are the same problems found in the writing of native speakers of English: spelling errors, faulty punctuation, and comma splices, run-on sentences, and sentence fragments, which are all punctuation errors, in a sense, as well as being indicators of faulty sentence structure. A punctuation chart used by

Ann Gonzalez of the University of South Carolina and shared with readers of the TECFORS newsletter, which I edit, is helpful for foreign students. Dr. Gonzalez' idea is to compare a punctuation mark with a road sign, while specifying where it is most apt to be found, and what reading speed and emphasis are associated with it. I've listed two examples:

Punctuation mark	Generally located	Reading speed, emphasis	Traffic sign Equivalent
Period	after Subject & Verb	Full stop, voice lowers	Stop sign, red light
Comma	In series: after introduction	Pause	Speed limit

Oral exercises are also extremely helpful -- foreign students seem to be receptive to the idea that one can hear punctuation marks and can distinguish between the sound of a comma and a semi-colon or period. One simple example will illustrate: pronounce the numbers 1, 2, and 3 in sequence, first with a question mark after each (1? 2? 3?), then with a period (1. 2. 3.), and then with a comma (1, 2, 3, (usually, my kids can't stand the suspense with this one: they sing out "four" in chorus). Another good exercise involves giving the students a paragraph with no punctuation marks or capital letters, and going through it orally, trying out various punctuation marks and discussing why a particular one does or does not "sound" right.

Mechanical problems which are rare in the writing of native speakers of English, but fairly common in foreign students' writing, include starting a new line with the comma or hyphen that belongs at the end of the preceding line, hyphenating words in the middle of a syllable, neglecting to indent paragraphs, or indenting every sentence as if it were a paragraph. Indenting every sentence may indicate more than just a mechanical problem, of course, but when the sentences follow a logical order, with careful transitions, the problem is easily dealt with, since it simply involves acquainting the student with a writing convention in English. The following example illustrates most of these mechanical faults; this student treated each sentence as a separate paragraph, while indenting nothing.

> Almost more than 4000 years ago an original artist shaped and polished by cutting on the side of a rock in northern Norway.

The portrait was a man on a pair of skis.

Today in the U.S. many people have something like that sto
-ne Age feature.

Many persons have begun joining into this very interesting sport
, which is called ski touring.

Errors of this sort are common enough to deserve class discussion before the first theme of the term is written.

Mechanics are a relatively minor problem. Sentence structure is a major one. English sentence structure is a mystery to many foreign students, because their native syntax is unlike that of English. As a result, some write only simple sentences, in which dependent clauses and compound sentences are never attempted, as in the following example:

Downhill skiing is not a city sport. It is limited to mountainous regions. Ski touring is a new kind of sport. It can be enjoyed by everyone. It can be done on open fields. It is different from cross-country skiing. Cross-country skiing requires first-class physical condition.

Others go to the opposite extreme, spinning clauses together with so many ands, becauses, sinces, howevers, whens, and ifs that the sense is lost before clause three. The following example is a case in point:

Concerning my high school background, I have studied in the American School since kindergarten and I will graduate in June, because I have a grade point average of B, and I have played on the varsity volleyball team since eighth grade and was chosen captain in my senior year, then I have taken all the required tests for admission and my ACT and SAT scores were average and my TOTAL score was very high, so enclosed with this letter will be my test scores and my transcripts from the sophomore year on.

Sometimes the best approach to these problems is to lay down a rigid rule: at least half of the sentences in a theme must contain 2 or 3 clauses, and none may contain more than three. Then be prepared to spend several days working on the specifics of clause structure. One approach is "sentence

combining" described by Patrick Kameen in the December TESOL Quarterly. Kameen's exercises consist of simple sentences with specific instructions for combining them, e.g. by substituting a relative pronoun for the subject of a sentence and adding a "when" to another sentence.

Another approach to the same end -- increasing the students' ability to handle complex syntactic structures -- uses syntactic models rather than actual sentences. The syntactic model approach deals more with abstractions than concrete examples, but it can be euqally effective.

A four-stage presentation seems to work best. The first set of exercises has the students create simple sentences which follow a particular pattern of Subject plus Predicate. Start with the simplest structure, Subject plus Intransitive Verb -- Noun plus Intransitive Verb, Determiner plus Noun plus Intransitive Verb, Pronoun plus Intransitive Verb -- and work through sentences with Copula Verb plus complement to sentences with Subject plus Transitive Verb plus Object. (Determiners and the tense and aspect complexities should be discussed at least briefly at this stage, if they have not already been covered.)

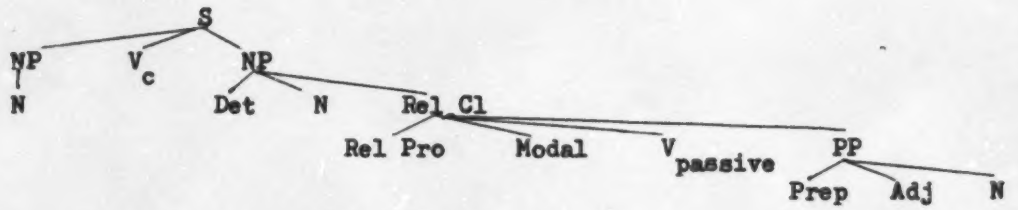
In the second set of exercises, modifiers are introduced, and the students are asked to create sentences following specific models, again starting with intransitive verbs and leaving transitive verbs till last. A model for sentences with copula verbs might look like the following diagram:

That professor is a sadist who assigns exams after every holiday. Any student is a fool who takes a composition course from that man.

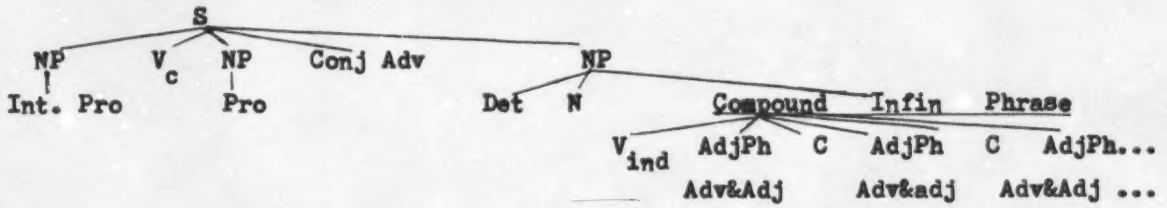
This is the place to introduce relative clauses, prenominal modifiers, appositives, adverbial phrases and clauses, and -- if you are brave -- participial modifiers.

The third stage involves the use of fairly complex models, such as shown here.

Sentence 1



Sentence 2 (a rhetorical question)



Anger is an emotion which may be overcome by cool logic. What is it but an inability to be calmly objective, not passionately irrational, and quietly persuasive, not loudly obnoxious?

The text which was used as a basis for the model is from Meredith's "Essay on Comedy" (Comedy, Garden City, NY, 1956, p. 33):

> Contempt is a sentiment that cannot be entertained by comic intelligence. What is it but an excuse to be idly-minded, or personally lofty, or comfortably narrow, not perfectly humane?

Possibly two-sentence paragraphs following the model:

> Newfi is a dog who can be hornswoggled by neighborhood cats. What are they but a reason to become thoroughly silly, or utterly clumsy, or unsufferably arrogant, and utterly doggy?
>
> Anger is an emotion which may be overcome by cool logic. What is it but an inability to be calmly objective, not passionately irrational, and quietly persuasive, not loudly obnoxious.

For texts to use as models, anything will work -- a paragraph in a newspaper, novel, textbook, magazine, instruction booklet, journal, catalogue,

advertisement, or your own mind. Giving the students a model with actual words, rather than abstract structural descriptions, can be helpful, but it has one drawback: many students have difficulty getting away from the vocabulary of the model.

Once the students have conquered the use of very specific models, let them try writing sentences following freer models -- models which specify NPs and VPs within both dependent and independent clauses, but leave the students free to choose the internal structures.

Two of my correspondents from San Diego State University would also like to remind composition teachers that a lot of foreign students are in scientific and technical fields -- many of them plan to be engineers. These students need help with passive structures, especially "agentless" passives of the sort, "It has been concluded that solar flares may disturb radio waves." Those of us with literary backgrounds may consciously or otherwise be pushing the idea that active sentences are the only "right" kind. But who wants to read a psychology text full of sentences like, "The author concluded/discovered/theorized/verified/believed that the experiment was valid"?

Sentences are not the only structures which pose problems; paragraphs and essays also require attention. Problems of paragraph and theme organization are not unique to ESL students, but the causes of some of those problems are. Elegant formal prose in some languages, when translated into English, may strike a native speaker of English as repetitious, abstract, and full of unsupported generalizations. Our demand from a piece of writing is, "Say something definite, and then prove it -- by example, illustration, expert authority, analogy, cause and effect, or whatever." I assigned a theme a couple years ago on the general topic, "What is the value of a college education in your country?" Here is one of the responses I received:

> I am worry for human; although I don't know him. Nobody know him, but God knows him. Because God created him and blew his spirit inside of human. At this time human was created, who completely different with another creation. However, man revolute in the world against whole previous systems. Man suppose that he is different with another things, why? Because he had mind and volition, besides

God said to him he is the best creation that create up to now. Therefore human can take care everythings like God, but with relation to his mind and his responsibility. Nevertheless he evoluted and changed somethings in the nature and added somethings to nature.

What is necessary is careful instruction, using outlines, topic sentences and one organizational mode at a time. I usually start with a "process" theme, because the enforced chronology of explaining how to do something provides its own organizational logic. By the time the class has worked its way through the modes to the analogy paper, their ability to organize ideas is pretty good. In class, we dissect articles in the student newspaper, published essays in a standard freshman composition reader, short reports in science magazines, or paragraphs from their text books, and we outline them. Then we abstract a model from the outline, and the students write a theme following the model. My students (I think it is true of all students) enjoy expressing their frustrations about dormitory food, so we set up three or four outlines, two of which follow:

Classification Outline

I. Introduction - thesis statement, briefly developed by classifying three or four categories.

II. Category one
   A. Subclass, example B. Subclass, example C. Subclass, example

III. Category two
   A. B. C.

IV. Category three
   A. B. C.

V. Conclusion - rephrase thesis

Comparison and Contrast Outline

I. Introduction - state in general terms the two things to be compared.

II. The similarities - basic makeup, ingredients.

III. The differences - process and final result.

IV. Conclusion - restatement that the two things are alike in some respects, different in others.

and each student chooses one of the outlines as a model for a theme about dormitory food. The classification theme sets up a paragraph on each of three categories of food, such as meat, side dishes, and dessert, each of which is discussed in terms of specific examples ("tired, grey, supposedly ground meat that looks as if someone's dog had chewed it and refused to swallow it."). The comparison and contrast often ends up as a celebration of mom's cooking, using the same recipes and ingredients that the dorm cooks louse up.

Even if the mechanics are faultless, the sentence structure varied, and the paragraph and essay organization clear and logical, there is often one remaining problem. A foreign student will often write a long-winded, woolly sentence or phrase because s/he does not have just the right word or words at tongue tip.

Example: For a present on the day when my family celebrated the day I was born, I received a pair of special shoes for wearing only in the house, not outdoors, and a sort of coat for putting on over my night-clothes.

Vocabulary stretching is necessary, but it should be done with care. Primary vocabulary needs are in the student's major area of study, which means that much vocabulary study must be done on an individual or small group basis. The time to worry about a student's ability to make fine distinctions between sets of words like "delicate, fragile, breakable" is after s/he has mastered the specialized vocabulary of his/her chosen field, be it economics, engineering, biology, marketing, accounting, or whatever. Colleagues in other departments are always happy to provide vocabulary lists for their students for use in composition class. Asking economics majors to write a report of a recent lecture in their economics class, for example, is a good assignment, if at the same time, the physics majors are explaining the theory of relativity or light, and the accounting majors are explaining debits and credits.

I have had foreign students who, at the end of their freshman composition course, could put some of our graduate students to shame. When they are good, they are very, very good.